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007, LICENSED TO KILL?

"The Target is Destroyed": What Really Happened to Flight 007 and What America Knew About It

by Seymour M. Hersh

(Random House, 282 pp., \$17.95)

In the very first words of his introduction, Seymour Hersh writes:

This book began because of the courage of a senior military intelligence officer who, while being interviewed late in 1984 on the shoot-down of Flight 007, decided to tell what he thought was the real story: the abuse of communications intelligence.

But if the book had not "begun" until then, why was Hersh already interviewing a presumably hard-to-interview intelligence officer on its subject? It could hardly have been for straight reportage: Flight KE 007 of Korean Airlines from Anchorage to Seoul was destroyed on the night of August 31/September 1, 1983, and no newspaper, however indulgent, would print news that stale. Thus, the misdirection to come—that the "real" story of Flight 007 is the American abuse of communications intelligence, rather than the Soviet destruction of the aircraft—is introduced by a transparent piece of misrepresentation.

For obviously Hersh had already launched his investigation, whose goal was to identify the true guilty party in the destruction of Flight 007 and the killing of its 265 passengers and crew. That culprit could not possibly be the Soviet Union: no investigative reporter can earn his keep by the mere confirmation of well-known fact, certainly not Seymour Hersh, discoverer of My Lai and one of our premier cover-up experts. It had to be the United States that caused all those deaths, either by an abusive exploitation of the flight for intelligence purposes that went wrong, or by a deliberate provocation that went right and duly enticed the Soviet attack. Only that would be consistent with Hersh's previous books, all of which are dedicated to the exposure of secret

American ill deeds. Was it the CIA or the NSA that had done it? And was the purpose technical-military, that is to force the Soviet Union to reveal its radar methods and air intercept procedures, or was it political, to precipitate an incident that would cast the Soviet Union in an evil light? Or was Flight 007 simply being used as a platform for intelligence sensors, and not meant to be shot down at all?

OF COURSE, if Hersh had declared his true purpose in his introduction, he could scarcely have justified the publication of his book, which in spite of its breathless subtitle ("What really happened . . .") contains no revelations at all, let alone any indications of American involvement in the destruction of Flight 007. Having found no guilty party in the CIA or NSA, nor in the EPA or HUD for that matter, and far too professional to construe a conspiracy out of irrelevant facts or plain fantasies (as the authors of two other books on Flight 007 have done), Hersh could have kept silent. But evidently he had invested too many months of his life in the effort to uncover the latest conspiracy, and having found nothing he decided to make the best of a bad job. Hersh's book is thus made of the leftovers of a failed investigation: a review of the 1978 incident in which an off-course Korean Boeing 707 was shot down (quite deliberately, beyond any doubt that time, as duly noted); a long, very detailed account of what intelligence was collected regarding Flight 007, how, by whom, and when (no, the attack was not being monitored as it was happening; Flight 007 could not have been warned); another 80-odd pages of detail on the timing and nature of successive American declarations about the incident (these pages contain the one charge Hersh actually makes against the administration: that it publicly misrepresented the deed, since it is possible that the Soviets meant to shoot down "only" an American military aircraft); 44 more pages of minute details on the flight, the likely cause of its errant navigation, and the attack itself; and finally a few pages of Hersh's conclusions, of which more below.

To be able to criticize the administration's response to the shoot-down, Hersh depicts himself in the unfamiliar and wildly unconvincing role of a protector of American intelligence secrets. Of course there was an abuse of precious communications intelligence by the ad-

ministration. A source was indeed compromised by the public disclosure before the United Nations and the world media of the intercepted voice communications between the Soviet ground controller and the SU-15 fighter, which ended with that expression of dehumanizing cruelty that gives this book its title: "The target is destroyed." The administration, needless to say, was prompted to disclose an important source precisely by the climate of distrust that Hersh and others like him have striven so hard to sustain. And it is perfectly credible that a military intelligence officer would have complained about it, even if it is totally incredible that Hersh would have shared his professional concern for the maintenance of official secrecy.

Those who wish to find out who exactly was responsible, George Shultz or William Casey or Ronald Reagan himself, or rather those who wish to deduce who among their many aides spoke to Hersh and in what terms, may choose to read his long and tedious chapter ("The Politics") on the subject. As he attributes sundry lucubrations to various third-level officials, the old distinction applies more than ever: servants talk about people, gentlemen talk about ideas. For of course, wise or unwise, the decision to release the information was collective. Moreover, Hersh's style exudes a confidence that should not be taken at face value. On page 100, for example, he makes much of the influence of Fritz Ermath, a senior CIA official. Now there is such a person, but William Casey could hardly have been "relying heavily" on his advice because he was not even in the CIA at the time, nor indeed anywhere in government. Unfortunately this is not the sort of book that can be scrutinized for errors, since it lacks detailed citations. But after a howler like that, one wonders where else Hersh's sources have misled him.

HERSH'S HONESTY as a reporter is not in doubt, even if he does dissemble about his motives. But precisely because he does not invent juicy facts where there are none to be found, because he does not concoct intrigues by spinning a web of insinuations of the

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